

AGENDA ITEM IV A

PROPOSED LETTER OF INTENT

NICHOLLS STATE UNIVERSITY

Master of Science in Marine and Environmental Biology

CIP Code 26.0607

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Nicholls State University intends to develop a proposal for a new Master of Science degree in Marine and Environmental Biology. The program is designed to produce graduates who can apply the techniques of environmental science and biotechnology to meet the needs of surrounding communities, local industries, and natural resources.

The program requires a minimum 32 credit hours of lecture, laboratory, seminar, and internship courses. Initial courses in marine and environmental biology are followed by a Policy Workshop, an internship in industry, and another internship in an agency. This sequence continues with a Graduate Seminar followed by a course on Research Problems. Students are then permitted to take 14 hours of electives, six of which can come from mixed undergraduate/graduate courses. To graduate, students must conduct original research and submit a final thesis.

Graduates would be employed in research centers, seafood, shipping, chemical industries, and state/federal regulatory agencies.

STAFF ANALYSIS

Appropriateness with Institutional Role, Scope, and Mission

The proposed program would represent a novelty for Nicholls: it would be the University's *first* graduate research degree in the natural sciences. In its defense, the University notes that the Regents' current *Master Plan for Higher Education* states that "the university's proximity to the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium (LUMCON) facility in Cocodrie and the vast, fertile estuaries in its service area place Nicholls in a strategic position for studies in marine science and related areas." It should be pointed out however that this role/scope/mission statement may change in the revised *Master Plan*, due later this year. It is impossible to measure now the extent to which the proposed program will be congruent with that revision. Moreover, the nature and function of LUMCON is currently undergoing review. When changes consequent on the review occur, the relationship between LUMCON and Nicholls (be it actual or potential) may change.

Potential for Unnecessary Program Duplication

No other institution in Louisiana offers a degree with this name. At issue is how much the *content* of the proposed program duplicates that of these other programs, and whether such duplication is unnecessary. The University's Letter of Intent acknowledges that M.S. degrees in Environmental Science are offered at three (3) public universities in the state, that one of them also offers an M.S. in Oceanography and Coastal Sciences and Fisheries, and that six (6) public universities in the state offer M.S. programs in Biology. The University argues that the content of the proposed program would be unique in its focus on "'real world' scientific marine and environmental *technologies and skills* that will foster the economic development, management, and preservation of *our* area's unique and vital natural resources" (emphasis added). Even if this claim is granted, the question remains open. As the external reviewer of the University's previous Letter of Intent hypothesized, "with sufficient resources, it undoubtedly would be possible to meet the projected program goals through expansion or redirection of existing programs."

Prospects for Funding

To support the new program, the University projects a substantial need for new faculty, graduate assistants, support personnel, library resources, service and supplies, and other equipment. The cost of these items are projected as follows. Figures for years two through five represent total (rather than new) costs of the program.

Year 1	\$237,800 in new costs
Year 2	\$250,300
Year 3	\$368,820
Year 4	\$357,800
Year 5	\$363,284

The University projects that revenue to cover these costs will come from the following sources:

1. State appropriations, estimated at \$137,800 in Year 1 (58% of total), \$150,300 in Year 2 (60% of total), \$268,820 in Year 3 (73% of total), \$257,880 in Year 4 (72%) and \$263,284 in Year 5 (72.5% of total). Note that these percentages increase yearly.
2. Federal funds in the form of faculty grants, estimated at \$50,000 each year.
3. "Other sources" of revenue, estimated to contribute \$50,000 each year.

On the subject of revenue, the University also makes the following related observations:

1. "The Office of Academic Affairs has plans for downsizing two different departments in anticipation of this new program. In addition, at least four faculty positions will be

transferred from those downsized departments to accommodate this new program's needs."

2. "A significant source of funding for equipment used by students is the new Technology Fee."
3. "If the proposed M.S. program is approved, faculty members will continue to seek federal funds for research, student research stipends, and equipment enhancement grants. With required facilities and new research faculty, it is predicted that success in obtaining federal funding will continue, and even surpass the current levels."
4. "Specific recruitment could be a significant source of funding for the program."
5. "At this time we are projecting approximately 25 students paying full-time tuition for Year 1 of the proposed program. This could generate tuition fees of about \$50,000."

The staff summary below provides further analysis of cost issues.

Consistency with Desegregation Settlement Agreement

The desegregation Settlement Agreement does not provide for the establishment of this or any similar degree program at any predominantly black state university.

STAFF SUMMARY

The proposed program may or may not be appropriate to the role/scope/mission of the University; this cannot be determined until the revised *Master Plan* appears. The potential for unnecessary program duplication has yet to be addressed fully: the University still must prove that existing programs cannot adequately serve state needs for such training. Regarding the prospects for funding the program, **Academic Affairs Policy 2.04** states that "The Board of Regents shall not approve planning for a new academic program unless the prospective program meets one or more of criteria 1-5 below." Staff summary statements follow each:

1. *The program will be formulated through a reorganization of existing courses, requiring no additional State expenditures for at least five years (for example, new options or concentrations in existing programs).*

No. The proposed program is not a reorganization of existing courses, since the University does not offer graduate-level courses in this area. The proposal does indeed request additional, and increasing, State expenditures.

2. *The program will be funded by concomitant reductions in expenditures, requiring no additional State expenditures for at least five years (for example, programs*

funded by the reallocation of resources from terminated or consolidated programs).

No. The proposed program may be funded in part by reductions in University expenditures, but it is also currently projected to require additional, and increasing, State expenditures for at least five years.

3. *The program will be funded entirely through non-State monies for a period of five years.*

No. The program is currently projected to require State monies for support.

4. *The program will demonstrably promote economic development in the State.*

The University has begun to make its case by including a large set of supporting letters from local business interests and government agencies, and by including assurances from the highest levels in the seafood, sugar cane, marine, oil/gas, chemical, environmental industries, and from the highest levels in state and federal agencies that the program would promote economic development.

5. *The program is deemed indispensable to fulfilling the role, scope, and mission of the university or college and is deemed indispensable to fulfilling critical educational needs of the State.*

This has yet to be determined, given the ongoing revision of the *Master Plan for Higher Education*.

To conclude, only the proposed program's lack of conflict with the desegregation Settlement Agreement can be said with certainty. The economic impact of the program is likely to be positive, particularly within the University's service area. Any conclusions, however, regarding role/scope/mission, duplication, and funding remain indeterminate.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The staff recommends that the Academic and Student Affairs Committee grant approval for one of two possible courses of action: (1) to defer a decision upon this Letter of Intent for a Master of Science in Marine and Environmental Biology (CIP Code 26.0607) at Nicholls State University until a better basis for assessment becomes available (i.e., completion of the revised Master Plan and the ongoing review of LUMCON); or (2) to approve this Letter of Intent, with the understanding that the proposal should await completion of the Master Plan and LUMCON review and, when submitted, should fully address all concerns expressed in the summary above.